

Address given by Indulis Berzins on Latvia and Europe (London, 24 January 2000)

Caption: On 24 January 2000, Indulis Berzins, Latvian Foreign Minister, delivers an address at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London in which he emphasises the implications of Latvia's accession to the European Union.

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Speech by the Foreign Minister of Latvia H.E. Mr. Indulis Berzins at the Royal Institute of International Affairs “Latvia and Europe: Common Values, Common Goals” (London, 24 January, 2000)

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm honoured to be addressing you at Chatham House. Though a Latvian President came more recently, 1936 was the last time a Latvian Foreign Minister appeared at this forum.

I'm glad to be here, and it's symbolic that my first visit in the new millennium is to the United Kingdom. Both the timing and the place have a special meaning for me, and for all Latvians.

Latvia entered the new millennium on an improved footing – last year we were named a NATO candidate country and were invited to start EU accession negotiations. This is a good time to acknowledge relationships that count, and to look at future perspectives.

And the place is important. The United Kingdom has always had a special role in Latvia's history:

- The UK recognised Latvia's independence de facto in 1918 - a week before its official proclamation in Latvia.
- In April 1919, the British navy saved the members of the Latvian government. For two months, a British steamship represented the entire territory of the independent Republic of Latvia!
- The UK never recognised de iure the annexation of the Baltic States into the USSR. Latvia's diplomatic mission was allowed to operate in London throughout the long years of occupation.

Historical sympathies allow us to conceive of the British-Latvian relationship in a long-term perspective.

In the foreseeable future, Latvia and the UK will be direct partners within the European Union and NATO; full membership in these organisations is Latvia's strategic aim. We are thankful for the clear expressions of political and practical support which Britain has offered and continues to offer.

A clear message ought to be conveyed by all NATO and EU member states that full membership of the Baltic States in these organisations is imminent.

The creation of one Europe, indivisible

We can look back on the great project of building Europe – a project that began more than forty years ago. Success is evident and objective. Expectations for economic co-operation proved justified and this was the right basis for integrated political co-operation. Agreeing on common values, a common identity, and respecting diversity – these are exercises no less important.

You will not find me agreeing with critics who say that the European Union lacks a vision for development. The Union, with over 500 million inhabitants, will be a democratically strong and economically competitive organisation with modern and open societies.

The direction is being pursued with conviction. Meaningful decisions have already been taken:

- the enlargement of the EU is a reality;
- single currency has been launched;
- ESDP, a European Security and Defence Policy, is being elaborated.

So we have signs on the way to a deepening and widening of co-operation.

We have all heard the expression "countries in transition." Most often Central European countries are meant by that. However, I would also like to apply this expression to the EU. The Union is an entity in transition. And the process has several dimensions:

The EU has to modernise for the 21st century and beyond. Simultaneously, the challenge of enlargement requires an adjustment of both the societies within the Union and EU institutions to the reality of having 27 or more members.

Latvia will be joining the EU soon. And we want the EU to become even more important as an economic and political power.

There will be sinkers and swimmers in the global economy of the new millennium. Increasing competition. Latvia is betting that the EU will be one of the swimmers. And a good team to swim with.

Europe's economic systems have to be modernised and success of the euro has to be assured. Otherwise, it will not be possible to sustain the traditional level of welfare. With respect to that, I welcome initiatives to increase employment in Europe, to create a well-educated European society, able to use the new resources in information technology.

We - especially we politicians in Europe - are responsible for making all developments more transparent and understandable to ordinary people. We have to explain that behind these visions stand common European values.

The feeling of European citizens that their voice is significant is fundamental to the success in enlargement and EU institutional reform, or any kind of reform and positive change.

Latvia's role

I've said that Latvia sees its future together with the UK in Europe, the EU and NATO. I've mentioned the challenge of enlargement. Now I'd like to talk about the role of my country.

It is important to emphasise that joining the European Union and NATO is not some kind of goal in itself for Latvia. It is part of the process of returning to where we have always belonged as a people and a nation.

Indeed, European integration puts a new light on national sovereignty. Closer political integration evokes various emotions in my country, as well as in other European countries. However, in the process of European integration national sovereignty preserves its value and does not lose the weight. It simply receives additional content and new responsibilities. And that is one of the great advantages of contemporary Europe.

I see Latvia's role in Europe developing through a promotion of what are generally regarded as our common European values. Democracy, private initiative, respects for human rights, linguistic and cultural diversity.

As you consider Latvia's place and role in Europe, notice that the eastern border of the Baltic states is not only going to be a border of the EU in its geographical or political sense. It is today already the border for

European values.

- Our joint task and interest is to promote these values. All available tools and means must be employed:
- the continuing political dialogue,
- diplomatic contacts,
- confidence-building,
- trade relations,
- cross-border co-operation
- All are useful.

A constructive approach towards neighbouring regions is a development of the EU Common Strategy towards Russia, towards the Ukraine, as well as the Northern Dimension initiative. A similar long-term vision is needed for other neighbouring regions.

Enlargement

Specifically on enlargement. I'd like to express my satisfaction that European integration has new steam in its engines.

The most important political decision for Europe in the next millennium has already been made. And it's the right decision - the Union will enlarge to encompass the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Enlargement will certainly pour new energy into the project of building a new Europe, united, free, and secure.

Today we understand security and stability in a broader sense than ever before. Human security includes political, economic and social aspects. Such understandings about security have led us all to view EU enlargement from a perspective of stabilising Europe.

Latvia supports an inclusive approach to the enlargement process. Such an approach was recently confirmed by the EU Helsinki Summit in December which united all EU candidates in the same accession negotiation process.

Accession negotiations should be an instrument guaranteeing the quality and standard of new members and the ultimate quality of an enlarged EU.

The conclusions reached in Helsinki provide the basis for negotiations, which are at once inclusive and individual. Negotiations are to be tailored to each candidate's individual preparedness. This is fair competition.

Speed should not be under-rated. Both quality and speed of negotiations are important.

It was attention to quality as well as speed that ensured success in our own reforms. Last year's European Commission Regular Report – the report on progress - is an objective catalogue of candidate achievements. In our Commission report, it says that Latvia is able to meet competitive pressures within the European Union in the medium term. Latvia can also be regarded as a fully functioning market economy. In the most recent report, only Latvia and Malta were evaluated so highly.

It was no accident that the Commission singled Latvia out as an economic success story.

Last year, exports from Latvia to the EU were 63%. Britain led the way - receiving 17% of Latvia's total exports - followed by Germany with 16%. Russia comes only in fifth place with 7% trailing Lithuania.

- Latvia is close to complying with most Maastricht requirements:
- the public debt is low (under 15% of GDP);
- Latvia's currency is pegged to SDR and its fluctuation is in line with the Exchange Rate Mechanism;
- annual inflation is below 3%,
- balanced budget with a slight fiscal deficit for the last two years,

Latvia will be ready to join the EMU upon accession to the EU.

Concerning the actual date for EU accession. I hope that everyone agrees that a country's individual achievements should be the biggest issue. Implementation of this simple principle would allow the three Baltic States to be among the first new members of the EU.

New members, well prepared to join the EU, are the best guarantee of a viable and strong European Union. And that's what we all want.

Security policy

There is no such thing as a regional solution to security in the Baltic area. Security of the region is an inseparable part of European and trans-Atlantic security. Security for the region and for Europe cannot be achieved without full membership of the Baltic States in the European Union and NATO.

While being far from the Baltic area, last year's events in Kosovo impact the whole of Europe, including our region. Events there have shown that:

- firstly, Europe can still be a place for atrocities comparable to those committed by the Hitler and Stalin regimes during World War II;
- secondly, NATO and the EU do not tolerate such atrocities taking place within their territories, and NATO and the EU are working to end such atrocities when they arise elsewhere in the euro-Atlantic space; NATO acts as a moral force;
- and thirdly, the Central and Eastern European nations, including the Baltic states, have made the right foreign policy choices and have acted as true Allies.

Events in Kosovo have demonstrated that Latvia, as well as the other Baltic States, are not just consumers of security, we are contributors.

Latvia sent humanitarian assistance. We were part of the Kosovo Verification Mission, and part of the AFOR operation in Albania. And that comes on top of our continuing contribution to the SFOR operation in Bosnia.

Latvia's decision to join NATO is based on pragmatism and ideals, on defence of territory and on co-ordination with partners. The decision to seek membership has been re-confirmed and championed by successive Latvian governments.

At the Washington Summit last year, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were finally recognised as eligible candidates. In order to qualify for the next round of enlargement, the Latvian government has made a firm commitment to raise the defence budget to 2% of GDP by 2003. Gradual increases will be made each year demonstrating that we have stuck to our promises.

Latvia is building its armed forces on the concept of total defence applying Nordic models. Such a defence

model requires strong public support, both for the armed forces and security policy objectives. A recent opinion poll showed that over fifty percent of the population of Latvia supports NATO membership. The government will work to increase this figure.

One of the most important principles of the new Europe is security of the whole euro-Atlantic area. To ensure that stability of the Baltics is permanent and irreversible, it is essential to consolidate this part of Europe.

All must realise that the Baltic States will join NATO. For some, this realisation is just dawning.

The Baltic destiny in NATO should be understood as a *fait accompli*. This must be brought home to Russia. Uncertainty serves no purpose.

We follow the development of the European Security and Defence Policy with great interest. The UK and France have been playing a leading and valuable role in the development of a European military force and better crisis management capacities in harmony with the Petersburg Tasks.

Nevertheless, we believe that the trans-atlantic link should be strengthened simultaneously with the development of a greater ability for Europe to take care of itself. Europe and the United States should work together to address and solve security problems.

Regional development

I'd like now to talk about the regional dimension.

The Baltic Sea region includes 4 EU Member states, 4 EU candidates, 2 members of the European Economic Area, and only one country that is not an EU member or an EU candidate. The movement toward EU integration is dominant.

The region is not only dynamic in terms of economic growth – it is the most dynamic in Europe - it is also an area of political stability.

The framework for co-operation among countries in the region is well established. Magic formulas include –

- trilateral co-operation among the three Baltic States - Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia;
- 5+3 co-operation - the Baltic and Nordic countries; and
- 11 country co-operation in the Council of Baltic Sea States.

For Latvia, the Northern Dimension initiative means more active involvement of the EU in the region. More active investment. The Northern Dimension of Europe embraces not only Baltic and Nordic countries but Russia as well. The inclusion of Russia in the concept provides a perspective of economic development, especially for the North Western parts of Russia. The initiative means that Europe will be exporting democratic values into the whole country. The Baltic States can facilitate the export.

The Baltic co-operation has always been one of Latvia's foreign policy priorities. Ten years ago, the people of all three Baltic states formed a hand-in-hand human chain, thus demonstrating their spiritual strength. We stood together linking hands from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius.

Baltic co-operation will not lose its importance even after integration of the Baltic states into the EU and NATO. Our unity will ensure the seamlessness of security and prosperity of the whole Baltic Sea region.

The United Kingdom shares an understanding with Latvia that Europe will not be secure if the Baltic region

is not secure.

An integrated society

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to address one last theme. The work of creating an integrated society.

We have been applying certain principles in this process:

- Firstly, by encouraging involvement of all social groups in democratic processes and supporting the work of NGOs;
- second, protection of human rights in accordance with international norms;
- third, extending the opportunity to become a Latvian citizen to all long-time residents;
- fourth, supporting Latvian culture and the state language – Latvian – with provision of funding and support for teachers and improved literature;
- fifth - state support for ethnic minority schools and cultural organisations. At the moment, state-financed secondary education in Latvia is available in eight minority languages – Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish, Hebrew, Roma, Ukrainian, Russian, Belarussian.

Recently, we have put these principles in one document, the Framework programme for the integration of society. We are proud of the open and transparent manner in which the programme was drafted and discussed prior to publication. The international community has backed and supported this work and the Latvian government listened to the advice of international experts.

The society of independent Latvia has developed peacefully. Inter-ethnic conflicts have never occurred in Latvia. Our situation cannot be compared with other countries where violence against immigrants and minorities keeps reappearing. Latvia has developed a positive model.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

a few remarks in **conclusion** -

- Latvia is linked with Europe's future; our work in European integration has been quite successful.
- Latvia is building an inclusive society with equal opportunities open to all.
- Latvia is offering a model of how to preserve traditions and respect cultural diversity.

Latvia and the United Kingdom are approaching the challenges of the 21st century hand-in-hand.

We are in one human chain linked by the values we hold dearly and in common.

Thank you.